

managing people conflicts

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Most of us have times when we'd like to "blow our tops" or "tell someone off." If we do, our professional image suffers and the situation usually gets worse instead of better. If we don't, we struggle on, inwardly frustrated with our working environment. Not only do we suffer, but also the program suffers. When relationships among staff or staff and clientele deteriorate, Extension education does poorly also.

We can manage conflict situations with sullen co-workers, high-handed secretaries, irate parents, or any of the other people who make us angry. A confrontation technique developed by Johnson¹ consists of eight steps designed to facilitate a mutual searching for a solution to the problem. The method will help those of us who are hot-headed plan a productive way of saying "that was a rotten thing you did." We'll be less likely to hurt people's feelings and sow seeds of resentment that may come back to bother us later. On the other hand, it will also help those of us who could use some assertiveness training, who tend to say nothing even though our needs are neglected and we're seething inside.

Cautions

Before we start, there are some cautions to consider:

1. Is the person important to me?
2. Is the issue worth considering?
3. Will talking about it improve our relationship?
4. Am I willing to spend some time helping?
5. Have I chosen an appropriate time for confrontation?

If the answers to these questions are yes, then proceed. If some answers are no, you need to choose a different method of expressing your concerns. This technique is for the big, important issues.

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**Eight-Step
Process**

"I" Statement

Statements should always begin with "I." "I need to talk to you." "I'd like to see you for a minute." That sounds like a logical way to start, but it's often forgotten. Instead, we barge right in with "You forgot to lock the back door again." "How many times do I have to tell you I don't want it done that way?" Step 1 shouldn't be omitted. It's easy to say and it serves a purpose.

*Relationship
Statement*

Start this statement with "we." "We've been married for two months now and we've managed pretty well." "We've worked together in this office of a long time and we've never really talked about this." The relationship may be a negative one. It may involve another person or a program. "We don't like each other very well, but we both care about Susie." "We don't know each other, but we're both interested in the beef program." The statement shouldn't only state the relationship or lack of it, but also tell something about the quality of it, the harmony or the strife.

*Describing
Offending
Behavior*

This statement needs to be a specific description of a specific behavior that occurred at a certain time in a certain place. "Yesterday afternoon when Mrs. Anderson asked for a bulletin on buttermilk you said you were too busy to look for it." A statement such as "you're always running me down" doesn't qualify. It must be something like, "Last night, you implied I was talking too much."

If a person becomes defensive, that's the cue for the confronter to repeat the relationship statement, to say for example, "We've been co-workers for a long time and I'd like to see us continue working together." The dropping back to repeat a level works well any time defenses go up.

*Describing How
You Felt*

"I felt ashamed to be part of this office." Now the preliminaries are over and the real confrontation begins. The description and the feeling can be combined; just remember to describe the specific occurrence of the irritating behavior and state the feelings aroused by it. A combined example would be, "Last night when we were reporting to the council, I felt terrible when you accused me of not really caring about the program."

*Understanding
Check*

This is a question to make sure the other person is understanding what you're saying. "Do you understand?" "Is this what you see happening?" "Do you hear what I'm saying?" These questions are crucial ones.

*Perception
Question*

You've told the other person how you feel about the situation; now you want to ask how they feel about it. "Does it seem unfair to you?" "How do you see it?" Checking for understanding and checking on feelings can be run together. "Do you see what I'm saying or does it look different to you?"

At this point, the confronter needs to be quiet and listen carefully. The listening must be genuine or you won't be able to proceed from step to step. Bringing out the feelings involved on both sides is a necessary part of making the process work and is particularly important here.

This technique helps to strengthen relationships rather than tearing them down. The little irritants are seen as petty and the important things are dealt with in a straightforward manner. Your relationship with the other person is freed to be productive.

Restating another's feelings is a part of "walking in the other person's moccasins." Hearing someone else's carefully worded, heartfelt statement can bring about amazing reactions on the part of the one being confronted. If the statement is "You made me so mad when you barged in here and called me lazy while I was talking to Barney," the accused is likely to become defensive and snap back with "Well, it's the truth isn't it?" But if the feelings statement is an "I" statement such as "I felt terribly hurt when you called me lazy in front of Barney" followed by "Do you understand what I'm trying to say?" the response is likely to be more thoughtful, perhaps along the lines of "You don't like it when I criticize you in front of people." A thoughtful response will help set the stage for the last steps of working together for a solution.

*Interpretative
Response*

Now you go back to the previous steps and repeat or paraphrase what the other person has said. "You can't understand why I'm so upset; it seems like a minor thing to you." "I get the feeling this has bothered you for a long time, too." This technique may be used in letters and, in that situation, this step would be a tentative interpretation of how the other person might feel about the situation.

*Constructive
Feedback*

This step calls for working together for a solution. Alternatives can be presented and possible consequences explored. This step is most effective when you wait for the other person to come up with some possible solutions. Some phrases to use

are: "What do you think would work?" "Do you have some suggestions?" "I'd like to talk again after we've both thought about it for awhile." Perhaps the solution is "I'm ready to forget it, too."

Sometimes people aren't willing to work clear through to a solution; then try again and get through more steps the next time. If you can't think of a specific example, just wait. If the problem is an ongoing one, another incident will occur. When it does, then it's time for a confrontation.

Evaluating Conflict Management

How effectively did you manage your conflict situation?
Was your confrontation:

1. At an appropriate time?
2. Genuine?
3. Informative?
4. Interpretive?
5. Tentative?

This technique isn't for the person who backs into your car or the character who bumps your arm. Use these steps with people and situations that are important to you. Two cautions: choose an appropriate time and be willing to spend some energy helping. Also be willing to put your own feelings into it. You wouldn't say "I'm mad enough to spit." Rather the statement would be "I am so mad because you typed Joe's letter instead of putting out my mailing." Carkhuff writes that the response is enriched by the merger of feelings and content.² We assume that people surely know why we're angry. But often they really don't.

To be effective, a confrontation needs to alert both parties to the problem and how it's viewed by the other side. A confrontation shouldn't be abrupt; rather, you should lead up to the problem. It should focus on a specific incident rather than dig up all past slights and injuries. It should identify some tentative solutions, searched for with genuine interest and concern.

Confrontations need not be negative. When I first began using this technique, I found it helpful to write each of the points on separate 3 x 5 cards and practice using them in positive situations where I was complimenting rather than criticizing.

Summary

That's the technique. If you're wailing, "But it sounds like a big production!" you're right. Criticism should be a "big production," saved for important matters. Personality changing

is a major operation. It should be undertaken cautiously and then only if the person is willing. One of the hazards of confronting a close associate or valued friend with something they're doing that you'd like to see changed is that your relationship with that person will change. The things your best friend won't tell you are painful ones. Relationships are built on shared experiences that are positive ones.

This technique helps to strengthen relationships rather than tearing them down. The little irritants are seen as petty and the important things are dealt with in a straightforward manner. Your relationship with the other person is freed to be productive.

Strong working relationships among Extension staff members will pay off in productive programming. Just as good classroom discipline frees a teacher to effectively instruct, cooperative co-workers and clientele will free Extension staff to enjoy their work while their efforts are multiplied by their supporters.

Why not try this technique the next time you're in a conflict situation? Going through these steps carefully will minimize hurtful, angry accusations or generalized complaining. Your energy will go where it counts, into building good strong working relationships among people who know how to express their feelings in a constructive manner.

Footnotes

1. David W. Johnson, *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972).
2. Robert R. Carkhuff, *The Art of Helping* (Amherst, Massachusetts: Human Resource Development Press, 1977).